

OPENING CONFERENCE
“Towards the Americas of the Year 2005: Democracy, Development and Prosperity”

Summary of the Keynote Speech

Keynote Speaker: **Mr. Oscar Arias Sánchez**
Nobel Peace Prize Winner (1987)
President of the Republic of Costa Rica (1986-1990)

Mr. Oscar Arias Sánchez, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1987 and President of Costa Rica from 1986 to 1990, enjoys enormous international prestige as a spokesman of developing countries and as an advocate of human development, democracy and demilitarization. Under his presidency, Costa Rica played an active role in the quest for democracy and peace for the countries of the Central American region. In 1987, he developed a peace plan — the Arias Peace Plan — to bring to an end the regional crisis. His initiative reached its culmination with the “Procedure to Establish a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America”, signed by all Central American presidents on August 7, 1987, at Esquipulas, Guatemala. In the same year, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. He devoted the monetary award accompanying this prize to the establishment of the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress. For his work, Mr. Arias received many honorary doctorates and several international awards.

Mr. Arias first congratulated the National Assembly of Québec for having taken the initiative of organizing this meeting, open to all parliamentarians of the Hemisphere, and for having held it prior to the second Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Americas, since it is indispensable for all democratic forums of the Hemisphere to assess the efforts made toward the objectives set at the first Summit in Miami, in 1994. In his view, it would be regrettable for the leaders of the Hemisphere to content themselves with discussing technical issues, without concerning themselves about the political, social and cultural context.

Mr. Arias thus rejected the idea that economic integration automatically generates democracy, development and prosperity. Without democracy, and hence without peace or stability, development and prosperity are not lasting. For this reason, according to Mr. Arias, the proposed economic integration of the Hemisphere must draw lessons from history, particularly from the breakup of the Soviet Union and from the significant progress accomplished by the European Union. The strengthening of democracy is a *sine qua non* condition for economic integration to lead to a lasting success.

Noting that for the first time in the Americas — with the possible exception of one case — democracy is omnipresent, he questioned the viability of these democracies. In his view, globalization and economic growth will not bring solutions to the poverty that afflicts Latin America if the decision-makers do not change their political rationale. Are the existing democracies able to bring about this change? Few have succeeded in redistributing wealth to the benefit of the greater number. Globalization could have made this possible. Unfortunately, the reality of it is completely different since it has confirmed the duality of our societies, shared between a minority who gain wealth through technological developments and a resigned majority who are denied access to education. Bit by bit, the dominant discourse is leading us to accept the unacceptable: that not all individuals will benefit from the spinoffs of economic development. We must therefore seriously reevaluate our moral criteria, Mr. Arias stated.

Moreover, while the centralized economic development models have failed, capitalism has also proven so far to be a costly failure. It must now be recognized that the State and the market are complementary and not adversarial forces. Economic development must make it possible to resolve social inequalities if we do not want to face the discrediting of democracy. Indeed, the enthusiasm generated by the wave of democratization is now largely tempered by the persistence of violence and corruption in all its forms.

According to Mr. Arias, history also teaches us the importance of education in the development of peoples. As long as societies are not prepared to invest heavily in the education sector, economic underdevelopment will persist, as will authoritarianism and social disintegration. It is necessary to educate in order to consolidate democracy, to form citizens who contribute creatively to the progress of their society.

Mr. Arias also called into question the scale of military budgets in the Americas, considering that these resources could be allocated to more useful purposes, namely the reduction of social inequalities. He recalled, on this subject, the initiative that he launched aiming to establish a code of ethics in the transfer of arms, by proposing to the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government, based in Atlanta, that it place pressure on arms-exporting countries to halt the arms buildup in the poorer countries.

He underlined that the Americas are at a turning point in their history, that peace now constitutes a viable option. An era of oppression has ended and many nations have declared that they are firmly resolved to work toward democracy and development. For Mr. Arias, the time has come to place more importance on human beings than on arms, to favour human security, meaning to protect human beings against ignorance, famine, isolation and persecution.

Addressing his words to parliamentarians, he recalled that the intellect is of no use unless it is put into the service of ideals. He asked them to arrange it so that through the power that they hold, human security may be made a universal priority. Fate must not be left to chance; it must be subject to the making of choices. And these choices must be based on a new ethic anchored in the political, philosophical and religious principles that have come down to us through history. It is time to find a reason for being for the Americas, he concluded, since perhaps we will then succeed in making this continent what we have sought to make it for more than two centuries.